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## On State Reconstruction in Nepal

Jeevan Raj Sharma

The Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) led a decade long (1996-2006) armed insurgency against the Nepali state. With the peace agreement signed in 2006, after nearly eleven years of the insurgency, Nepal is currently going through an intense process of state reconstruction. The old constitution and the 250-year-old monarchy have been cut off but the new constitution and the new political system is yet to be established. The Constitutional Assembly, following the elections in April 2008, is set with the task of writing the new constitution by addressing a number of grievances raised by various identity groups. A long list of immediate issues facing the Nepali state in the current liminal phase include: the integration of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), continuing violence and lack of state control in the Terai, ongoing impunity and lack of accountability, provision of justice and reparation for victims of the conflict, agitation by ethnic groups, recognition and inclusion of historically marginalised groups, political contests over the shape of federalism in the new State, transformation of the Maoists into a democratic force, re-establishment of a peaceful political process and the democratization of state institutions. Perhaps Gramsci's words best explain the current state of Nepal: *"The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born. In this interregnum, there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms."*

The spread of the Maoist rebellion in Nepal has led to a growing scholarship and analysis on causes, complexities and the prescriptions to address the issues raised by it. There is a tendency within the current dominant discourses to attribute the causes of the revolution to 'internal' political, cultural or economic reasons, and the solution proposed have been in line with this diagnosis. The most common diagnosis relates to a narrative of state failure in which the nature and causes of crises have been attributed to state's inability to democratise social relations and political authority, failure to provide basic services despite decades of development aid and widespread corruption. Consequently the current

debate on state reconstruction includes issues of ethnic and regional federalism, affirmative action, inclusive state, people's democracy and addressing the grievances of identity groups among others. But this may be only a partial explanation. What if the causes of grievances and current political crises are far broader than those proposed by the 'state failure' discourses? What if the causes of the political crises in Nepal stretch beyond the borders of Nepal? Perhaps there is a fundamental problem in the way the causes of the Maoist insurgency and associated grievances are understood and are being addressed in the current context of state reconstruction.

In the following paragraphs, I make three points on why explanations for the Maoist insurgency and associated crises should be understood beyond Nepal's borders. I argue that the armed revolt and a meaningful process of state reconstruction in the Himalayan country must include a broader analysis on Nepal's integration into the broader processes of globalization, felt primarily through the economic and political dominance of the Indian state. One can read the current crisis as a consequence of the incorporation of the Himalayan borderlands into the broader global processes. This incorporation, and the tensions that it created, have contributed to the armed rebellion, widespread out-migration, radical movements associated with ethnic and regional identity among others. In conclusion, I will argue that the crises in this Himalayan borderland should not only be attributed to failure of the Nepali state but also with a particular lens of analysis that ignores factors that lie outside Nepal. I thus challenge mainstream explanations for failing to comprehend the broader framework and nature and of the Nepali state and state reconstruction. At this point, I must make it clear that I am not saying that 'internal factors' such as historical marginalization and structural and cultural violence are not important. I fully agree that these 'internal factors' played an important role in the spread of the Maoist insurgency and long-standing grievances in Nepal. My argument is that an over-emphasis on these 'internal factors' with a systematic ignorance of 'external factors' characterizes current debates on state and its reconstruction in Nepal. This has obvious implications for the future.

It is a paradox that while the implications of global processes, and Indian expansionism can be felt in the everyday life of Nepali population, the long-standing issues relating to Nepal's sovereignty, dependence and integration do not get serious analytical attention in the current debate on state reconstruction. Let me discuss three points on why the political crises associated with Maoist revolt and grievances raised by the population must be viewed beyond Nepal's borders.

*First*, let us consider some of my interactions as a part of my larger research with the Maoist fighters. In my interviews (#32) with Maoist fighters on experiences of joining the insurgency, almost all did not just talk about 'torture', 'discrimination' and 'lack of livelihood opportunities' but put equal emphasis on 'protecting Nepal's border' from India. To name a few, their grievances included 'border encroachment' by India, 'unequal treaties imposed by India', 'pollution of Nepali culture by foreign culture and Indian cinema', 'destruction of Nepali industries with Indian goods', 'influence of foreign power in Nepal', 'migration of Nepali workers abroad and brain/labor drain'. In their narratives, there was sense of loss of Nepali culture, self-reliance and sovereignty. Consequently, these young men and women saw their participation in the insurgency as a resistance to preserve their culture, politics and economy against Indian and global expansion. Their experience in the insurgency included digging bunkers in the Nepal-India border, border march from the Mechi (Eastern border of Nepal) to Mahakali (Western border of Nepal), rejecting Indian movies in cinemas and chanting/wall-painting anti-India slogans at the event of perceived Indian dominance. Against such lived experience and sentiments, it is difficult to attribute these narratives only to political indoctrination. Desire to fight for the protection of Nepal remained a consistent theme in my interactions with these young men and women.

Likewise, anti-India sentiment is neither a new phenomenon in Nepal nor it is limited to Maoists or other political parties. Anti-India sentiment or grievances against India can be regularly observed in Nepali media, street demonstrations and informal everyday discussions among large sections of Nepali population. These grievances are rooted in the psychology of a small insecure landlocked state surrounded by India on the South, East and West. The anti-India sentiment is so intense that it is often important for many

Nepalis to blame India to demonstrate one's commitment to the nation. Despite that there are strong cultural, trade and migration links between the two countries, the sanction imposed by India in 1989 on Nepal and the hardship it caused to the general Nepali population, and discrimination faced by Nepali migrants, pilgrims and travelers in India explains the hostility towards the Indian state. All these very clearly demonstrate the impact of geo-politics on the lived experiences of Nepalis and the grievances, real and perceived, against the Indian expansion.

**Second**, let us look at the list of demands (grievances) presented by the Maoists before they went for armed revolt. The Maoist agenda were reflected in the 40-point demand submitted on 4 February 1996 to the then Prime Minister, Sher Bahadur Deuba; the demands were organised into three thematic concerns- 'nationality' (1-9), 'people's democracy' (10-26) and 'people's livelihoods' (27-40). The Maoist insurgency was not only built around an agenda that attacked the feudal nature of Nepali society and the structural violence inherent in it, but also on the issue of state sovereignty and Nepal's ubiquitous dependent relationship with India. Likewise, the Maoists did appear hostile to the idea of foreign aid and the presence of INGOs operating in Nepal at least at the initial stage of the insurgency. However, it appears that the Maoist themselves have abandoned the demands relating to nationality once they signed the 12 point agreement in New Delhi. Since then these demands have been excluded from the Maoist agenda, and it appears that they are not even discussed in the current debate on state reconstruction. Just because the Maoists have abandoned these issues, primarily for pragmatic reasons, does not mean that these issues are not relevant in the current process of state reconstruction in Nepal. Issues of sovereignty appear perhaps more important than ever when we have a situation where aid actors and international agencies directly shape the current debate on state reconstruction and constitution writing by pouring millions of dollars through several projects. Likewise, ubiquitous role of India in shaping the everyday political processes in Nepal is regularly reported in the media.

**Third**, I won't be making a novel argument when I say that Nepal has been historically dependent on India. Based on their earlier research work in western central Nepal in 70s, British social scientists Piers Blaikie and colleagues predicted a crisis in Nepal and

argued that the development of capitalism in Nepal is effectively precluded by Nepal's relationship with India, its own class structures and the nature of the Nepali state. The expansion of Indian economic processes have effectively disabled the economy and disempowered the economic agency of hill population.

In contrast to its northern neighbor, Nepal and India share a 1751 kilometer open border which was formalised by the Nepal-India Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1950. Possibly there are two reasons why neither the colonial regime in India nor Nepali rulers showed much interest in controlling the border. First, it facilitates the flow of cheap labour from Nepal into India. Second, it facilitates the flow of raw materials from Nepal into India and, in reverse, the flow of commodities and goods manufactured in India into the Nepali market.

A few statistical facts may help us think more towards the significance of external factors in Nepali state and its reconstruction. *First*, about 3-4 million Nepalis (out of 30 million) live outside of Nepal and appear to actively participate in the debate on state reconstruction through various networks and mobilisations. *Second*, migrant remittances tranfered through official channels alone contributes to about 18 per cent of Nepal's GDP. I would estimate that the actual contribution of remittances may be as much as 30 per cent of Nepal's GDP. *Third*, foreign aid contributes upto 74 per cent of Nepal's development budget (or 27 per cent of the total budget). What might these mean for the current debate on state reconstruction?

## II

In order to understand why 'internal' factors dominate the existing analysis on Maoist rebellion and current debates on state reconstruction, we must interrogate the actors that play a key role in producing and brokering knowledge on Nepal. To do so, I invite analysts and social scientists to interrogate two sets of actors: existing scholarship and development aid actors on Nepal.

There is a tendency within the academic scholarship to view Nepal as a bounded unit with very little analysis on how this region relates to the wider world. Though social scientists in principle agree that it is important to look at global processes and how they influence local and vice-versa, there has been very little attempt to analyse the nature of Nepali state and current process of state reconstruction from a regional or global perspective. There is a strong tendency in the scholarship to view life in the hills of Nepal largely as a discrete and timeless society unaffected by the outside world. What anthropologist Liisa Malkki calls 'sedentary bias' appears to shape the scholarly work on Nepal. Until 1990s, anthropologists, who played a key role in producing knowledge on Nepal, preferred to write detailed ethnographies of different ethnic groups; only recently they have begun to pay attention to state-society relations. However, there has been hardly any serious attempt to situate the social and political processes in Nepal within the regional analysis of the Himalayan borderland. One possibility is to take inspiration from the work of James Scott in South East Asia and study the crises in Nepal as a part of larger processes of incorporation of the Himalayan borderland within Indian expansion. Ignoring this dimension is a bit like ignoring the elephant in the room.

Through their 'expertise' and 'influence', aid actors and associated actors play a significant role in producing knowledge on state and state reconstruction in Nepal. They appear to hold an assumption that a nation state is bounded and so must be the unit of analysis, planning and interventions. Following the epistemology of bounded nation state and their (non) political position, their analysis always focuses on 'internal factors' simultaneously ignoring 'external' factors that shape the politics and political processes in Nepal. They hold an implicit assumption that state reconstruction in Nepal is an internal affair. Missing the 'external factors' that shape the Nepali state may not be ignorance but a more or less conscious political choice made by the aid actors working on Nepal.

To conclude, the scholarship on state and state reconstruction in Nepal must incorporate a geo-political analysis on the integration of the Himalayan region into the broader economic, political and cultural processes of Indian expansion and globalization. I argue that ignoring the 'outside' of Nepal has serious consequences, not only because so much

of what happens in Nepal is determined by the outside strategic geopolitical interests, but also because the diasporas and remittances play a critical role in shaping of the reconstruction of Nepal. Failure to address these factors may be read as a political choice made by current scholarship towards designing a particular nature of Nepali state that continues to remain a weak one. A meaningful state reconstruction must include significant transformation in Nepal's current relationship with India and the wider world.

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